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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Stellungnahme / comment

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:
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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Rudolf, P. (2016). *Liberal hegemony and US foreign policy under Barack Obama.* (SWP Comment, 40/2016). Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-48082-3

SWP Comments

Stiftung
Wissenschaft und
Politik

German Institute
for International and
Security Affairs

Liberal Hegemony and US Foreign Policy under Barack Obama

Peter Rudolf

Looking back at the US foreign policy discourse since the end of the Cold War, it is striking how entrenched and dominant one basic assumption has been: the idea that the United States must remain the leading power in the international system. According to this conception, the United States is and should remain the guarantor of international stability. Despite all the debates that have taken place between liberal and conservative internationalists, US foreign policy ideology is still defined by an understanding of the US as "benign hegemon", even though the term itself is hardly used. America's leadership is believed to be benevolent in the sense that it is in the best interests not only of the US but also of most states worldwide. Yet in the current presidential race, for the first time since America's rise to global leadership, a candidate is running under the slogan of "America First"— an attitude that marks a significant break with the dominant hegemonic role conception.

At the level of foreign policy discourse, "realists" in academia and in libertarian think tanks (notably the Cato Institute) have long advocated a grand strategy of selective engagement—but so far with little political resonance. At the political level, the populist Tea Party wing of the Republican Party and, more importantly, Donald Trump as the party's presidential candidate, tend toward instinctive semi-isolationism—or to use a term coined by Walter Russell Mead, toward a "Jacksonian" foreign policy view, mixing the preference for a strong military with opposition to anything smacking of international liberalism in the Wilsonian tradition (Rathbun 2013). But the foreign policy "establishment" remains wedded to versions of the traditional hegemonic role conception and to a "strategy of primacy" (Mastanduno 1997), apparently fearing the risks of retrenchment more than the costs of continued "deep engagement" (Brooks/Ikenberry/Wohlforth 2012/13).

Here, two variants of a hegemonic foreign policy have been competing with each another. On the one hand, there is the unilateral, occasionally almost imperial foreign policy approach that finally took shape in the wake of September 11, 2001, but that had its roots in the debates of the 1990s. On the other hand, there is the predominantly liberal internationalist, multilateral approach to foreign policy. Both

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approaches agree on maintaining American dominance in terms of material power resources. Also, both approaches display a pronounced disposition toward the use of military force in the pursuit of a number of goals. Both are united in their perception of threats from illiberal regimes and failed states as well as from Islamist extremism. Both approaches share a globalist view of American interests and the conviction that the US should remain committed to and involved in all strategically important world regions. The two approaches differ, however, in the importance they ascribe to international legitimacy and, thus, to the role of multilateral institutions.

There are three key functional preconditions for the role of a liberal hegemon (Ikenberry 2001):

- First, a preference for multilateral mechanisms, giving other states the opportunity to bring in their own interests and perspectives, and a willingness to obey the rules governing all members of multilateral institutions and to constructively build and develop such institutions.
- Second, the provision of public goods from which other states can benefit. This essentially legitimizes the hegemon's leadership role and increases the chances that other states will accept its role and the special responsibilities and privileges that are associated with it. Leadership in providing public goods entails the willingness to intervene militarily for the sake of the international order even if vital national interests are not directly affected.
- Third, maintaining cooperative relations with other major powers, whose interests must be taken into account in order to reduce any incentives they might have to challenge the American-led international order and alter the balance of power.

Obviously, actual US foreign policy has never fully corresponded to this *ideal type*. Unilateral tendencies could already be observed during the Clinton administration, which understood US leadership in the sense of liberal hegemony. Unlike later under President George W. Bush, this tendency was not the product of the administration's strategic orientation. Rather, it arose structurally through the strengthened role of Congress after the end of the Cold War. Congress turned out to be open to resistance from particularistic social and bureaucratic actors to increased multilateral integration of American power (Thimm 2016). And ideologically, Republicans in Congress were drawn toward a policy focused more on narrow national "great power" interests than on the imperatives of hegemonic leadership (Skidmore 2005).

Yet the concept of the liberal hegemonic role remains present as a regulative ideal in the American self-image, and as such, also functions as a critical yardstick in assessing US foreign policy. Does this self-conception correspond with current political realities? Do operational policies live up to the strategic imperatives resulting from this role conception? These are the questions that guide the following analysis. As this can only be a brief attempt at addressing them, the analysis is confined to the level of what may be called the "grand strategic orientation." This notion refers to the guiding principles of foreign policy, which are sometimes formulated explicitly in declaratory strategies, and sometimes only recognizable implicitly in operational policies.

Obama's grand strategic orientation

The grand strategic orientation of the Obama administration can be interpreted as an attempt to reformulate and re-legitimize US leadership by adapting it to a changing international system with a shifting distribution of power and influence among the major powers (Quinn 2011). It is a strategic orientation sensitive to the costs of foreign interventions and to the difficulties of translating power into real influence through the use of military force in particular, which has proven to be both expensive and of limited value in

asymmetric conflicts. The guiding assumption seems to be that the United States is less hampered by a lack of material resources than by the continuing challenge of re-legitimizing US leadership (Buzan 2008). Indeed, in spite of its relative decline, the US position within the international system continues to be characterized by clear superiority in terms of the unique combination of hard—military, economic, and technological—power resources (Cox 2012). But a hegemonic role transcends the use of brute power; it requires that other states accept the hegemonic leadership as legitimate. Clearly, at the declaratory level, but less so at the operational level, foreign policy under Obama has reflected the functional logic of the hegemonic role conception (Ikenberry 2014; Rapkin/Braaten 2009).

Restoring moral authority

By distancing his administration from the worst excesses of the "war on terror," Obama tried to restore a common basis of shared interests and values between the US and those countries that are expected to follow American leadership, especially the traditional US allies. The expectation seemed to be that a new, positive perception of the US would make it easier to mobilize international support for US objectives. When he took office, Obama stated that over the course of the "global war on terror," the US had undermined the values that had made the US strong. But his pledge to restore the moral authority of the US and thus one source of "soft power" was more difficult to translate into operational policies. There is no doubt that since that time, as Obama promised, interrogation methods have been limited to those outlined in the *Army Field Manual* and therefore within the limits set by the *Geneva Conventions*. Secret prisons have been shut down, with the exception of those where detainees were held temporarily on transition to other facilities. Rendition, a practice dating back to the Clinton years, has not been fully abandoned. And the promise to close Guantánamo ran into bipartisan Congressional opposition, which Obama did not dare to bypass through unilateral executive action. The Obama administration jettisoned the term "global war on terror", but has not abandoned the war paradigm. The war against al-Qaida and so-called "associated forces" has continued, with the meaning of the term "associated forces" stretched to include almost any violent extremist Islamist group. The administration has argued that this "armed conflict" is not geographically confined, an assertion that is highly contentious under international law and not shared by many allies of the United States (McCrisken 2011).

With these legitimizations as the context for US military operations, long-range, remote-controlled, highly accurate combat drones have enabled a largely opaque institutionalized practice of more or less targeted killings to unfold within a grey zone of asymmetric conflicts. Drone warfare became the hallmark of Obama's version of the war on terror, which—despite murmurings even among US allies—has not received much public criticism and has also not significantly changed the overall positive international perception of Obama and his foreign policy (Wike/Stokes/Poushter 2015).

Multilateralism (if possible)

President Obama promised to further develop institutional procedures embedding the US in multilateral frameworks and allowing other states to have some influence on US policies. In Obama's political program, a stronger multilateral orientation—the term "multilateralism" is rarely used—has also meant calling allies to take on more responsibility and passing on costs to other states. In contrast to what initial pronouncements seemed to indicate, the Obama administration has not undertaken any vigorous effort at adapting formal institutions in order to anchor and socialize rising powers. Instead it prefers to use informal ad-hoc institutions, most

notably the Nuclear Security Summit held in April 2010 (Vezirgiannidou 2013). Preserving freedom of action has remained a key feature of US foreign policy even under President Obama. With a Congress that is institutionally inclined towards unilateralism and, particularly among Republicans, deeply averse to anything smacking of multilateralism, only a minimal instrumental multilateralism has been politically feasible (Skidmore 2012). As the Obama years have again shown: in US foreign policy, multilateralism is hardly more than instrumental, meaning that international institutions are useful as long as they help to reduce costs and lend legitimacy to US foreign policy actions, and as long as these institutions do not impose constraints on the United States.

In the economic sphere, traditional multilateralism has given way to a form of what the administration calls "pragmatic multilateralism" (Froman 2015). With the Doha round of global trade talks having reached a standstill, the priority shifted toward regional trade pacts. It is hard to say whether this shift was originally inspired by a geopolitical rationale or whether it was rather framed this way to shore up domestic support in light of the uncertain welfare gains and overall employment effects resulting from regional trade pacts. In effect, it meant a "return of geopolitics" and the prospect of competing trading blocs (Dieter 2014). For the United States, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP) is seen as a way of countering Chinese hegemonic aspirations in Asia by denying China the political leverage over other Asian countries in case they become too economically dependent on China. Together with the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), it offers the US the prospect of preserving its leadership role in setting the ground rules of the international trading system (Green/Goodman 2016; Hamilton 2014).

Providing collective goods

The role of a global leader comes with both benefits and obligations: other states allow the leader to exercise greater influence, but expect it to provide collective goods. But a global leader can use its material resources to pursue national interests unilaterally (Cronin 2001). If it behaves as the US did under President George W. Bush, the foundations of its leadership role and the institutions through which it can legitimately act as a leader will be undermined. US leadership under President Bush was strongly focused on, or indeed almost reduced to the "war on terror" (Kagan 2008). President Obama's idea of leadership has transcended this conception. By trying to take on a leadership role in climate policy and in nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation policies, the Obama administration has sent a clear and positive signal to the international community.

Assuming a leadership role in contributing to climate stability was a major challenge for Obama. The US Congress, concerned about the costs, was opposed to any comprehensive climate change bill and any binding international agreement on reducing greenhouse gases. By resorting to politically controversial executive action, especially the new regulations based upon the Clean Air Act, Obama circumvented domestic opposition and proved that he was serious about changing the US position from blocking to leading. And by persuading China to agree to reduce its emissions, the Obama administration paved the way for the Paris Climate Agreement in December 2015. As a set of non-binding commitments, the Paris agreement did not directly involve Congress. The agreement may fall short of the actions needed to effectively tackle climate change, but it represents the culmination of a long evolution in the US role in climate policy: a transformation from spoiler to leader (Sussman 2015).

No less controversial domestically was Obama's vision of a nuclear-weapons-free world. The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) remained the modest

first—and last—step toward this utopian goal. Reviving nuclear arms control with Russia undoubtedly had some value: Although the relationship between the two countries soon began to deteriorate again, the treaty was implemented smoothly, with the transparency and verification measures probably acting as an antidote to potential miscalculation and worst-case assumptions in a climate of growing mistrust (Pifer 2016). With Russia uninterested in further strategic nuclear cuts and with the role of nuclear forces in US security policy still not substantially reduced, as became clear in the 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR), the prospect of further, more ambitious nuclear disarmament looked bleak. In 2013, a follow-up study to the NPR concluded that deployed strategic nuclear forces could be further reduced by no more than one-third in a new arms control treaty. Unilateral cuts were not envisioned by the Obama administration (Woolf 2015). Whether or not the US nuclear weapons modernization program launched by the administration actually undermined the administration's 2010 pledge not to develop or deploy new nuclear warheads remained the subject of controversy, even among former Obama administration officials.

Cooperative relations with major powers

If the United States wants to use international institutions, especially the United Nations, in an instrumental way, then it must necessarily maintain a cooperative relationship with major powers that are not US allies. This holds true especially if US leadership is understood as akin to directing a "concert" of major powers, a conception that was implicit in the strategic vision of the early Obama administration. But the logic of a global "concert" implies that regional geopolitical rivalries can be managed and that they will not spin out of control as a result of regional counterbalancing (Kurth 2009). The classic instrument of mitigating geopolitical competition between major powers is the acceptance of "spheres of influence" (Hast 2014). But in the US discourse, "spheres of influence" are rarely seen as a model for regional order that reduces the risk of war and acts as a precondition for global cooperation (Shapiro 2015). Rather, in the dominant narrative, granting a "sphere of influence" to another power is generally condemned as appeasement (Kagan 2015). Thus Russia's and China's claim to "spheres of influence" has posed a serious challenge to US foreign policy and has raised the question of whether the US should tacitly accept such spheres or deny them at high costs (Etzioni 2015).

From the start, the Obama administration has placed a clear priority on "resetting" relations with Russia that had deteriorated over the last years of the Bush administration and on establishing cooperation on security issues. It hoped that by developing a comprehensive agenda for cooperation, Russia might be more forthcoming on issues of utmost importance for the US foreign, especially nuclear arms control and nuclear nonproliferation (Deyermond 2013). Even as US-Russian relations reached their low point in the wake of the Ukraine conflict, the Obama administration did not resort to a confrontational containment policy. Instead, it tried to walk a fine line: On the one hand, it reacted to the Russian annexation of Crimea by supporting the Ukraine (but without lethal weapons), by imposing targeted economic sanctions, and by militarily reassuring NATO's Eastern members; on the other hand, it tried to maintain the basis for cooperation on global issues (Charap/Shapiro 2015).

Whereas Russia is perceived as a regional power ready to reassert its claim of a "sphere of influence" in the former Soviet space, managing the economic and military rise of the People's Republic of China is seen as *the* major geopolitical challenge of the coming decades. The relationship between the US and China contains the ingredients for a geopolitical power rivalry: China has been expanding its economic

and military power, and its regional and global influence is growing, while the US is determined to remain an Asian-Pacific power and not to accept China's regional hegemony. The Obama administration was able to build on the strategic framework for dealing with China that was established by the Bush administration with the aim of further integrating China into the international system and incorporating it as a constructive actor into a concert of great powers under US leadership. This strategy does not, however, assume that China's rise will occur peacefully. Rather, it allows for the possibility that an antagonistic rivalry for hegemony will emerge. Political cooperation and economic integration were therefore pursued under the Bush administration through a notable increase in strategic hedging. Maintaining American military supremacy and expanding security relationships with states in the Asia-Pacific region had become central elements of this hedging by the end of the Bush administration. The Obama administration intensified these elements of the strategy, while at the same time trying to continue cooperative relations with China (Wolf 2014).

Regional rebalancing

Strengthening the US alliance system in the Asia-Pacific region, deepening relationships with rising powers in that area, becoming more involved in regional organizations, and, as already mentioned, deepening economic integration through the TPP became the central features of the policy of rebalancing towards the Pacific under Obama (Paul 2015). Over more than a decade, the arc of crisis in the broader Middle East, from North Africa to Pakistan, was the central focus of US foreign policy, consuming significant attention and resources—too much attention and too many resources, as the Obama administration concluded in a very "realist" calculation of US interests.

Thus, the basic thrust of Obama's policies for that region soon became clear: They would aim at reducing the costs and burdens of direct military involvement and at avoiding new commitments of this kind. Drones, bombs, Special Forces and proxy fighters (such as the Kurds in the fight against ISIS) would take the place of "boots on the ground," counterinsurgency, and nation-building. In a nutshell, that is the line President Obama has maintained, even in the case of Syria, unfazed by the chorus of critics demanding more involvement, either to demonstrate greater resolve or for humanitarian reasons (Krieg 2016). With the exceptions of several failed efforts at reviving the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Talks and of the successful Iranian nuclear talks, the Obama administration has basically refrained from playing a leadership role in the Middle East, remaining primarily reactive and avoiding costly commitments (Gerges 2013). Although wedded to the hegemonic role, the Obama administration has distinguished clearly between what it sees as core regions and issues on the one hand and more peripheral regions and issues on the other (Rose 2015). The next US administration, if led by Hillary Clinton, might have a less differentiated view—but at the risk of overestimating the potential influence and leverage the US can exert on a number of developments.

Conclusions

Obama's strategic orientation has reflected the functional logic of liberal hegemony to a large extent, perhaps as much as was possible given the domestic constraints and structural bias of US foreign policy towards unilateralism. The US Congress is skeptical of and often opposed to any embedding of foreign policy decisions into multilateral institutions that could diminish its influence. Congress not only sets severe limits on US multilateralism; it has indeed become a driving force of unilateralism. If there is one major issue on which Congress acts in a bipartisan spirit, it is on economic sanctions (Tama 2014). Congress has been the main driver of US sanctions policy, often trying to bind the hands of presidents.

The result is a certain amount of unilateralism resulting from the extraterritorial reach of major sanction laws.

But this unilateral temptation is not confined to Congress. The Treasury Department has intensified and refined the use of so-called secondary sanctions, especially financial sanctions based on the central role of the US dollar in the international financial system (Lohmann 2014). The question of unilateral US sanctions could emerge as a highly controversial issue under the next administration if the US embraced a full-fledged containment policy against Russia or if the Western world became divided over efforts to manage China's rise. With the re-emergence of great power rivalries, US foreign policy is confronted with new challenges. Future historians might look back at the Obama era as the zenith of liberal internationalism and its vision of benign hegemony.

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ISSN 1861-1761

(English version of SWP-Aktuell 56/2016)